SRA Grants for Fire Protection & Tree Mortality in Calaveras & Amador Counties

-Chronic Problems, Needs, Solutions & Capacity-

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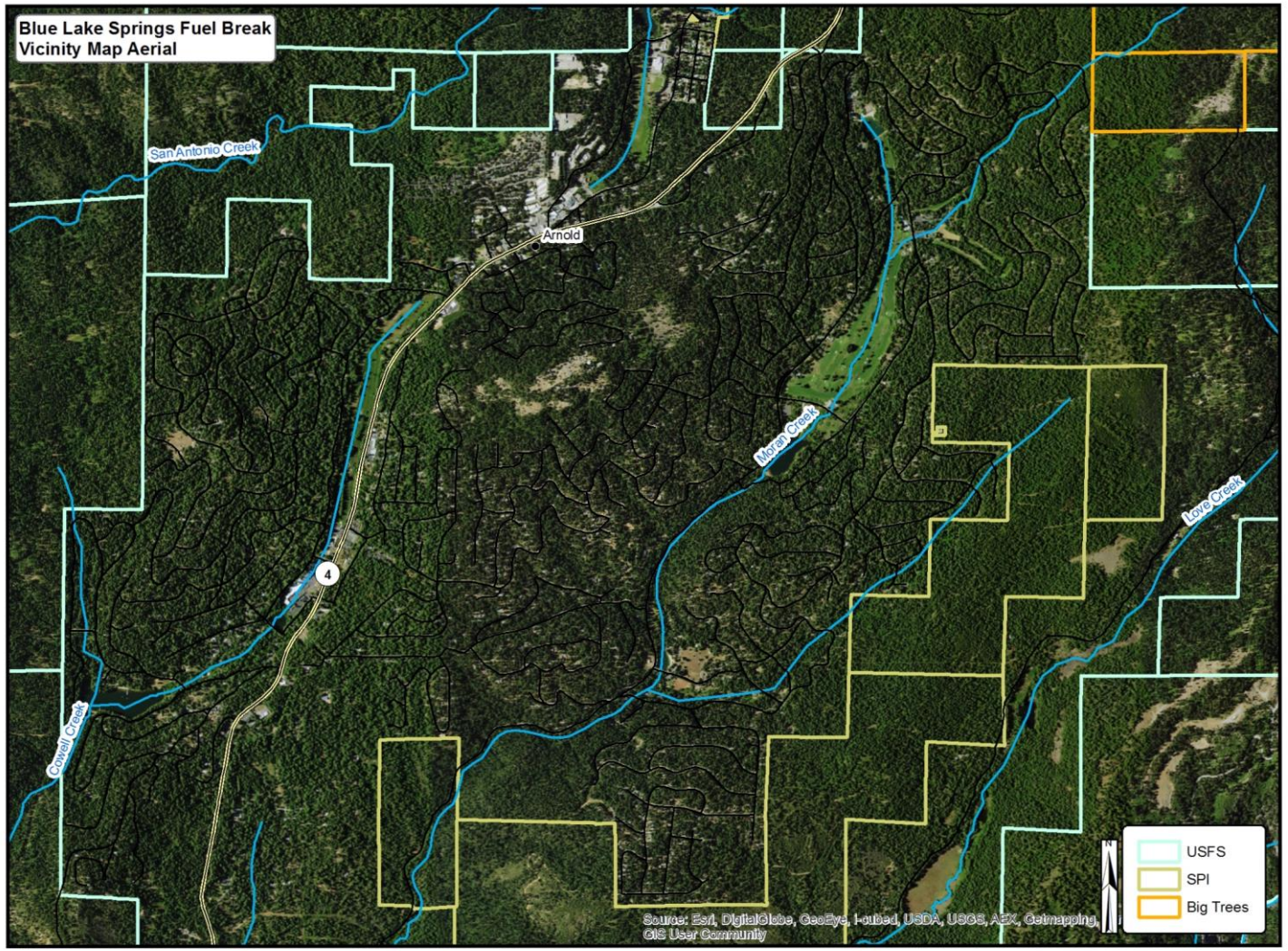
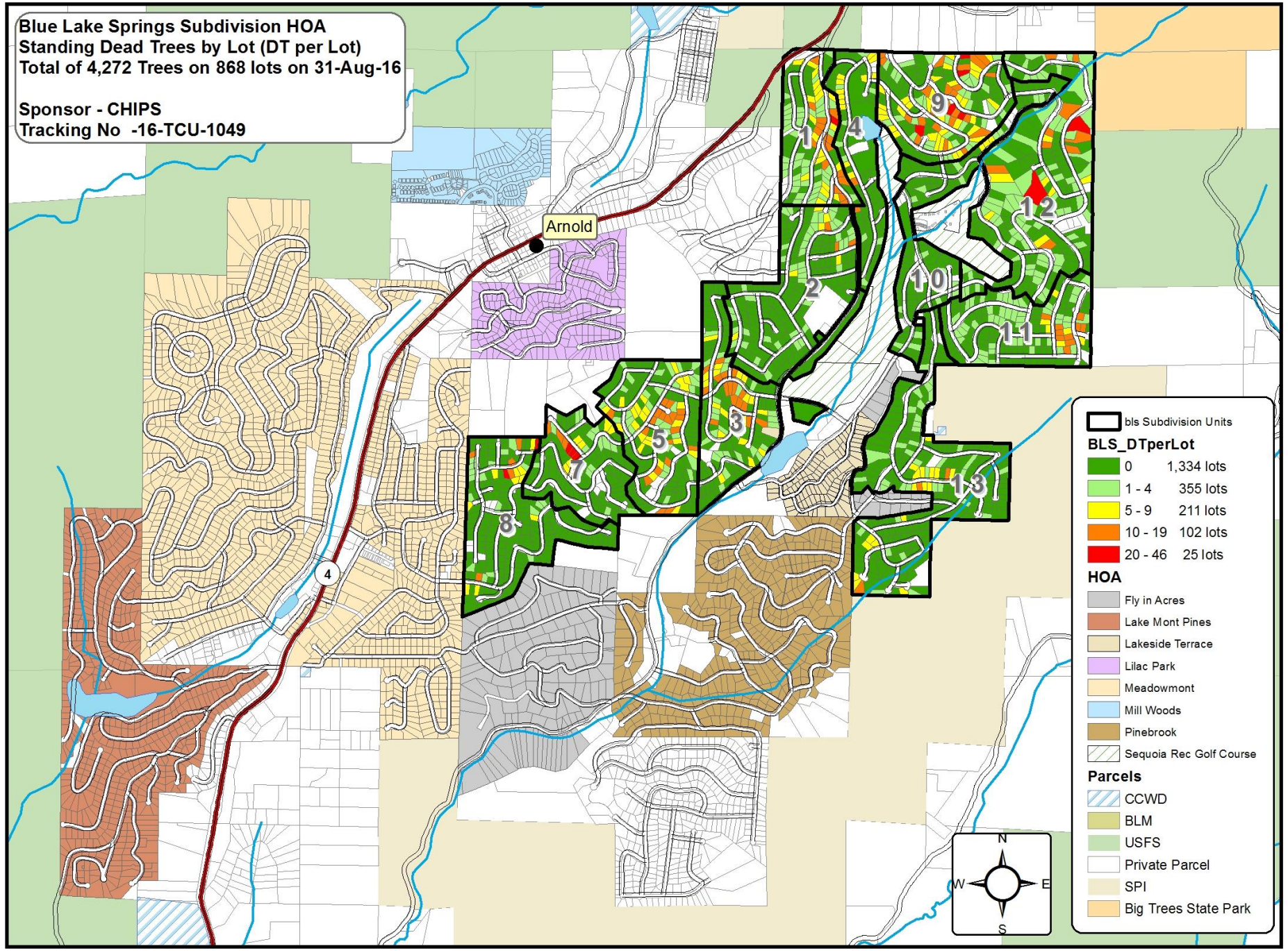
Lesson 1. Manage our urban & rural SRA forests

- Problem
  - Our foothill forests have not been managed for generations and are overstocked.
  - Catastrophic fire and bark beetles attack overstocked forests.
- Solution
  - **Thin forests**, foster species diversity, grow big trees, maintain open space …
- Need
  - A Forest management plan on **urban & rural forests** that applies to **residential and absentee** land owners.
  - Encourage communities to develop, implement and monitor management plans like CWPPs in cooperation with local Fire Safe Councils, Fire Districts and CAL FIRE.
- Capacity
  - While half of Calaveras County is forest, it has never had an RPF on staff to assure forest resilience to fire, drought and disease.
  - CAL FIRE could help by allocating 1% of SRA revenues to hire county RPF managers.

The urban forest in the Arnold subdivisions of Calaveras County have grown for 55 years without management and are now overstocked



Bark beetle epidemic in the overstocked urban forest in the Blue Lake Springs Subdivision in Arnold



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Homeowner Sticker Shock in BLS

Lesson 2. Develop tools to suppress bark beetle epidemics

- Problems
  - There are no rapid diagnostic tests to detect active bark beetle infestation.
  - There are no rapid response teams to kill the developing beetles in infested trees before they fly to the next stand.
  - Without these tools, we can only chase and abate dead hazard trees.
- Needs
  - Research to develop diagnostic tests that detect beetle specific pheromones.
  - Deploy 'Breathalyzer' like kits or sniffer dogs to detect infested trees in the field.
  - Train response teams to fall and treat infested trees and/or develop systemic insecticides and delivery systems to treat infested trees.

Without tools to control beetle populations, the epidemic expands unabated while we chase dead trees and remove those that are hazards!

Lesson 3. Abating hazard trees requires organization & resources

The BLS TM program is a model worth emulating:

- It is managed by volunteers with a professional business background.
- The HOA has an annual budget of $1,300,000 for safety and service.
- CC&R authorizes HOA personnel with the ‘right of entry' to all lots.
- CC&R details procedures for fire fuel removal including hazard trees.
- BLS cadre of 40+ volunteers run the ‘Firewise’ and ‘Volunteers in Prevention’ programs. They inspect all 2,017 lots in June for compliance to fire regulations.
- This cadre now surveys all lots in April, August and October for hazard trees and homeowner compliance to TM regulations.
- Data storage, analysis and reports are automated in the ‘BLS Community Forest Management System’.

Lesson 4. Provide financial relief to homeowners

- Problems
  - The cost to abate one dead conifer in an urban forest averages $1,200.
  - At BLS, there are 1–46 hazard trees/lot so homeowners pay $1,200 - $55,200 for abatement.
  - ***The elderly on fixed incomes cannot afford these costs and ~10 of them were forced to sell their homes!***
  - While homeowners applaud PG&E's hazard abatement program, they still must pay additional cleanup costs.

- Needs
  - Expand the CAL FIRE TM grant program to assist more homeowners, especially the elderly low-income residents who can't secure a loan.
  - Encourage banks to offer low interest loans for hazard tree abatement.

- Capacity
  - Calaveras and Amador counties cannot finance and administer TM programs.
  - Local grant writers must be recruited to secure more grant funding.

Lesson 5. Stretch SRA grant awards with a cost share plan

- Problem
  - The maximum award for SRA grants is $200,000.
  - After subtracting admin costs, this award will only abate ~167 trees at $1,200/tree.
- Solution
  - Implement a cost-share program with homeowners to abate more trees.
  - By rebating homeowners 25% (~$300) of their abatement cost, the grant award will abate ~661 trees.

  - BUT, reimbursement grants can be problematic when low-income homeowners can't meet the up-front cost! Thus, reimbursement programs might cover the full abatement cost for people at risk of losing their homes.

Lesson 6. Expand SRA grant eligibility

- Problem
  - SRA TM grant rules exclude 501(c)(7) HOAs and other communities in need.

- Need
  - Expand applicant eligibility criteria to include all communities in need that can demonstrate the ability to implement projects at the $200,000 level.
  - Extend eligibility to 501(c)(7) HOAs, Fire Wise Communities, Community Service Districts and Communities described in the County General Plan if they have a CWPP.
  - Note that 501(c)(7) HOAs are eligible for Cal FSC grants.

Lesson 7. Provide grant writing support to needy communities

- Problem
  - SRA grant programs use a ‘bottom-up’ process initiated at the community level.
  - But most communities are unaware of these funding opportunities and lack the expertize to write and administer grants.

- Need
  - Communities must to identify their local needs, find an appropriate grant opportunity and submit their own applications.

- Capacity
  - CAL FIRE, Fire Safe Councils, Resource Conservation Districts and others, like the CalAm Forestry Team, should assist new SRA Grant applicants to increase local capacity in grant writing and administration.

God Helps Those Who Help Themselves!

Lesson 8. Minimize grantee liability

- Problem
  - Should a grantee (i.e. Fire Safe Council) fail to select a tree for abatement and it falls on a home, the grantee could be liable for negligence.
  - Note that the Ebbetts Pass Fire District declined to serve as the fiscal agent for TM grants because of this liability issue.
- Solution
  - The SRA grantee should limit cost sharing to hazard trees selected by the homeowner themselves.

Lesson 9. Support SRA grantees during TM implementation

- Problem
  - Administering SRA hazard tree abatement grants are complicated by the need for ‘right of entry’ documents and tracking transactions with 200+ land owners.
- Need
  - Train community volunteers to conduct hazard tree surveys, assist homeowners, validate abatement, track expenditures, coordinate with CAL FIRE and close the grant.
- Capacity
  - The knowledge and skills gained from the TM grant program should serve as the basis to develop community wildfire prevention programs.
  - After TM recovery, CAL FIRE and the FSC should encourage SRA grantees to participate in Firewise and ‘Volunteer in Prevention’ programs.

Final Thoughts

- While an enormous effort is underway to assist homeowners via SRA Grant Programs, the benefits fall far short of the need.

  Securing grants to chase dead trees is not the long-term solution.

- Our forests are ravaged by drought, beetles and wildfire caused by mismanagement or no management and we can no longer bear the cost of recovery.

- Forest survival rests on vital investments in active management on urban and rural forests by residential owners, absentee owners, communities and utility districts as well as the USFS and BLM.

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure!